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ABSTRACT

Research can provide insights into problems related to adult basic education (ABE) program success. The potential ABE population is great; for example, the Maryland target group includes nearly 1,097,000. Several studies have revealed that those needing ABE most are least likely to be program participants. Various problems that often overwhelm the poor are unemployment, marital instability, and low self-esteem. In addition, other learning involvement barriers include costs, insufficient motivation, time factors, and discouragement. It is important to overcome these obstacles. One way is by providing relevant programs. Norvell Northcutt and Deborah Hickok have identified cogent (1) literacy program content areas (consumer economics, occupational knowledge, community resources, health, and government/law) and (2) primary skills (communication, computation, problem solving, and interpersonal relations). Various appeals to learners have been identified; for instance, Allen Tough's research suggests that adults are interested in learning something of immediate use. In addition, Patrick Penland found that adults like to set their own pace; Nan Booth found that low-income urban adults prefer the trial-and-error learning method. Daniel D. Pratt identified five important learning environment factors: developing adult-to-adult working relationships, developing mutual understanding, dealing with closure, establishing role clarity, and guarding the contract. Finally, in surveying where adults like to learn, several studies have discovered that adults prefer learning at home. (CSS)

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RESEARCH TO
PRACTICE IN ADULT BASIC
EDUCATION

By: Gene C. Whaples*

Presented at the 1979 Maryland
Association For Public Supported
Continuing Education Conference

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Introducti

Is Adult Basic Education the last gamble in education? Is it the difference between success and failure? Is it the key to the future or are we just kidding ourselves? Is it a futile effort, or are chances for success as good without it as with it?

I'm certainly not here to answer this question? Hopefully, in the next hour, a review of some of the research will at least provide some insight into the problems related to succeeding with ABE programs.

The best statistics that I could find indicate that over 54 million Americans of working age have not completed high school and are not enrolled in school. Nearly 60% of these have less than 9 years of education. Based on what I have read and heard, competency levels are much lower than the years of school attendance. This ABE target population is evenly distributed between the sexes, proportionately is more black than white and has a heavy concentration of people over 45. (NACAE, 1974: 9, 10, 11)

This lack of basic skills is reflected in both employment and income. Nationally, employment rates for high school graduates are twice as high as for the dropouts. Only one percent of those without 12 years of education made \$15,000 or more in 1970, while 75% were making \$5,000 or less. (NACAE, 1974: 31)

The figures for Maryland indicate that there is room for improvement. In 1970, only 52% of Maryland adults had completed high school. That means that there are nearly 1,097,000 adults who might be considered the target for ABE. Seven percent of these have less than six years of schooling. Over 104,000 are between the ages of

16 and 24. In 1978, less than 31,000 adults were enrolled in ABE and during that year, 10,266 of them completed the 8th grade level and 2,256 completed the 12th grade. At the same time, 19% dropped out and did not complete the program. (Dept. of HEW, 1977-78, Maryland Performance Report)

There are a number of factors which have been identified that effect adult participation in continuing education. A 1958 study found that, in general, those who participate in educational activities are the more educated. (Holden, 1958) A 1965 study supported these findings and indicated that the higher the income, the more the education and the better the occupation, the more likely that a person would participate in continuing education. (Johnstone and Riveris, 1965: 6,7) 1976 research by Cross supports this phenomena relating to continuing education. The obvious frustration with these findings is that the educational gap between the haves and the have-nots seem to continue to widen. Those adults who need ABE the most are the least interested. (Gross, 1976: 4)

Special Problems of the Poor

As ABE teachers, the frustrations of trying to reach your target audience, must seem to be overwhelming. It is not that the poor do not value education; it seems more a case of their environment being so overwhelming an influence that the traditional models of providing education do not and possibly cannot serve their needs. Some characteristics of the poor differ markedly from the rest of society. These include: (1) long periods of unemployment or intermittent employment, with public assistance often as a major source of income; (2) when employed, occupational positions are

usually at the lowest level of skills; (3) high rates of marital instability with females often ending up heading households which include illegitimate children; (4) low levels of involvement in highly organized volunteer based activities; (however, a recent study indicates high levels of involvement in selected volunteer activities such as church and athletic groups); (Mason and Whaples, 1979: 40), (5) little interest in the events and activities in the larger society, often with a feeling of alienation from the larger society and (6) a sense of helplessness and a low sense of self worth. (Boggs, 1976: 15 - 16)

To become even more specific, a 1979 study by Booth of low income urban adults in Cherry Hill Baltimore, a large public housing area, has provided us with some insights into this ABE target population. Personal interviews of a randomly selected sample revealed some interesting facts. In this area, 90% of the households were headed by females and 100% of them were black. Twenty three percent had eight years of education or less and 68% had less than 12 years of education. Eighty-one percent were not working, 10% were working part-time and the remaining, representing less than 1 in 10 reported working full time. Is it surprising that although a large percentage are concerned about further education, that with the responsibilities, frustrations and lack of income, they are not flocking back to complete a GED or participate in ABE. The encouraging factor is that 60% reported that they had participated in some continuing education activity during the last year. (Booth, 1979)

Adult Learning Interests

The Booth study has explored what adults are interested in learning. It seems to me that the challenge for ABE programs is to creatively link the learning interests with the primary skills which are the basis for

adult employment and job satisfaction. Northcutt and Hickok suggest there are five general knowledge areas which could be considered as content of adult literacy programs. These include: (1) consumer economics, (2) occupational knowledge, (3) community resources, (4) health, (5) government and law. They have also identified four primary skills. These are: (1) communications skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), (2) computation skills, (3) problem solving skills, (4) interpersonal relation skills. (Northcutt and Hickok, 1976: 86)

A number of studies have provided us insight into what adults report as their interests. Tough suggests that adults are interested in learning something of immediate use. (Tough, 1971) Penland reports in 1977 that 75% of the national population is interested in learning practical topics. Other studies rank as the top interests vocational education, home and family, hobbies and personal development. (Johnstone and Riveria, 1962; Coolican, 1973; Johnson, 1973; Carp, 1973)

Booth's study, which was specifically studying an ABE target population of low income urban adults, listed three areas of learning. These included home and family, job training and general education. (Booth, 1979)

Learning Preferences

In discussing learning preferences, I will explore findings in two areas; the first being how adults learn and the second, where they learn. Four studies by Tough (1970, 1971, 1976 and 1977) found reading, practicing, listening and conversing to be preferred methods. However, these studies did not focus on

the ABE target population. Studies by Johnstone and Riveria (1965) and Carp (1973) indicated that, as far as formal instruction was concerned, lessons or classes were often mentioned as preferred methods. The 1977 Penland study seems to me to more adequately speak to our concerns related to the ABE target population. Penland found that adults prefer to set their own pace and control their learning experiences. Booth's 1979 study, which specifically dealt with low income urban adults, indicated that trial and error was the preferred method of learning. This finding could well be related to the dissatisfying experiences that they had as students in the traditional learning environment.

These findings related to how adults learn when combined with the effectiveness of teachers certainly raise some interesting problems for us as adult educators. Pratt points out that, "There is little or no substantial evidence or consistent or replicable features of instructor behavior that lead directly or even indirectly to valid learner outcomes across varied situations." (Pratt, 1979: 106) In fact, the teacher effects on learning achievement are unstable (Rosenshine, 1970), and for that matter most teaching behavior appears to be unrelated to learner outcomes (Heath and Nielson, 1974; Rosenshine and Furst, 1971).

Pratt has been doing research in instructor behavior and psychological climate in adult learning. His recent paper, presented at the 1979 Adult Education Research Conference, has provided us with a way of looking at some of the key factors related to the adult-teacher-learner environment as seen by learners. These

factors and their components have been identified by testing both instructors and adult students drawn from a wide representation of groups to include Adult Basic Education. The factors are: (Pratt 1979: 111-112)

A. "Developing An Adult-To-Adult Working Relationship:

The instructor demonstrates respect for the experiential base of adult learners, their immediate orientation to learning, their subsidiary role as "learner", and constructively uses the diversity of adults participating in the instructional sessions.

B. Developing Mutual Understanding, Support, and Responsibility:

The instructor encourages participants to share in the responsibility and authority for making decisions and helping each other in relation to the course of instruction.

C. Dealing With Closure and Ending:

The instructor helps participants reach closure on the instructional content (eg. summing up what's been accomplished and planning for further learning or application) and their membership in a group that may have developed close relationships and been mutually helpful.

D. Establishing Role Clarity and Credibility:

The instructor clarifies his role and function (as he understands it) and his expectations for participants, while at the same time establishing his credibility in that role.

E. Guarding The Contract:

In discussions and other work, the instructor guards the agreed-upon contract and boundaries for the instructional group by keeping the group on topics related to the goals of the course and not allowing himself or participants to wander off on irrelevant tangents.

These five factors make good sense. Pratt has identified a list of sixteen components which make up the five above mentioned clusters. Those that are interested in a better understanding of the items may want to read his paper in the Proceedings of the 1979 Adult Education Research Conference.

Earlier I mentioned that we were also going to look at where adults learn. Adults (50-60%) viewed the home as the most suitable place to learn. (Peters and Gordon, 1973; Penland, 1977; Booth, 1979) Other places that were ranked high included: churches and synagogues (Johnstone and Riveria, 1962; Field, 1977), place of work (Peters and Gordon, 1973; Field, 1977; Penland, 1977) and schools (Fields, 1977). Booth in her ABE target audience study found that 25% preferred learning in the street. The challenge to us then becomes how do we take our content in a palatable fashion and offer it in the places adults prefer to learn.

Problems Adults Have

Becoming involved in learning for the ABE target population is difficult at its best. A number of studies have pointed out

some specific problems. These include: (1) cost or finances (Johnstone and Riveria, 1965; Carp, 1973; Peters and Gordon, 1974), (2) motivation and lack of time (Peters and Gordon, 1974), schedules/inconvenient time (Johnstone and Riveria, 1965; Okes, 1972), tiredness or illness (Johnstone and Riveria, 1965; Okes, 1972), fear of going out at night for older people (Hiemstra, 1977). Probably the reason closest to the true feelings of ABE target audiences was that found by Booth in her 1979 study. She found discouragement as the main learning barrier.

Conclusion

I have attempted to review some of the more recent research that relates to ABE. It seems to me that many questions remain unanswered. These questions are probably best understood by practitioners who face the dilemma of recruitment, retention and education of ABE students on a day to day basis. A better link between researchers and practitioners is one way of helping to find the answers to the day to day questions.

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